

# Visitor Use, Services, and Facilities

Death Valley National Park has long provided recreational opportunities for people from all over the world. Its nearness to major population centers such as Los Angeles and Las Vegas, combined with major interstate highways, gives residents the opportunity for relatively easy access to many parts of the desert. Most of the landscape is open, with broad vistas of relatively undeveloped land. The vastness of the landscape offers visitors an opportunity for seclusion and a sense of wilderness, even while in a vehicle. Early miners and ranchers developed roads that today offer visitors a chance to drive into many remote locations where informal camping has traditionally occurred. The many roadless areas offer hikers the experience to explore. There are many cultural sites such as abandoned mining districts that many people love to visit. The mountain ranges, such as the Panamint and others offer a contrast to the dry hot valleys, attracting many people in the summers with cooler temperatures and forested areas. Exposed geology and unique wildlife and vegetation are other elements that attract people. The land has many extremes and contrasts which people come to experience, such the high summer temperatures. Most visitors come to the desert simply to see the outstanding scenery of this diverse landscape.

## CARRYING CAPACITY

Park managers are often faced with decisions about how much use of a particular area is appropriate, given the need to protect resources. Decisions regarding buildings, such as museums and historic structures, are usually dictated by law and the physical capacity of the space to contain people. Visitors face these limits everywhere they go and they are widely accepted. Similar decisions regarding natural spaces are not as easily derived, nor readily accepted. Most people understand that there is a need to limit the number of people that can float the Colorado River at the same time, in order to preserve the experience. However, determining how many people can use a particular area of the Park without impacting resources or other visitors experience is often more difficult.

A widely accepted definition of carrying capacity is:

*"the character of use that can be supported over a specific time by an area developed at a certain level without causing excessive damage to either the physical environment or the experience of the visitor."*

There are three principle components that relate to determining the carrying capacity for a national park:



The ecological or physical capabilities of the natural and cultural resources to sustain certain levels of visitor use without reaching unacceptable levels of damage. Each landscape may have varying abilities to absorb different kinds of and levels of visitor use before unacceptable levels of impact occur.

The sociological carrying capacity is the ability of visitors to enjoy and appreciate these resources without interference by other visitors. Determining social carrying capacity can be one of the most difficult parts of the three components. Identifying numbers relating to visitation in an area is not a valid determinant of a quality visitor experience. Other factors such as visitor behavior, preconceived expectations, and social norms of the dominant user group can also effect visitor enjoyment.

The type and amount of NPS management that has been, or can be applied to the activity to mitigate unwanted impacts is also a factor. The third component relates to the management of park roads, parking lots, buildings, trails, and visitor information. For example, providing interpretive services is an effective way to instill in the visitor an understanding and appreciation for park resources. Such understanding helps implement carrying capacity for a particular area. Limiting parking in certain areas can effectively limit visitation.

The implementation of recommendations as called for in this plan will increase the level of protection for fragile or sensitive resources. Until future implementation plans are developed, the National Park Service should manage visitor activities in a way that leans toward resource protection. Preservation of sensitive species and their habitats is a priority and

sensitive population resource degradation due to public use or other activities would not be allowed. Aggressive and appropriate action will be taken to protect these habitats until the degraded habitat has been restored and appropriate long term protection for the species has been put in place.

General management plans provide NPS managers with management direction on a broad, prescriptive level. Management objectives for carrying capacity are thus written as narrative statements. These statements define the desired future visitor experience and resource conditions in qualitative terms such as “sense of seclusion,” or “low degree of tolerance for resource degradation.” The qualitative descriptors that have been identified as “desired visitor experience and resource conditions” will be refined and translated into quantitative standards during future implementation planning. As previously mentioned, indicators and standards of quality for both the physical and social environments will be developed within future implementation plans. These products will be quantifiable and measurable aspects of the carrying capacity process.

## **DESIRED FUTURE CONDITIONS**

Desired future conditions for natural and cultural resources and the visitor experiences are described below. The descriptions are qualitative in nature and can be translated into quantitative standards over time during the implementation of this plan. Some descriptions could be applied to broad areas such as wilderness, while others apply to smaller areas such as road corridors and points of development. These descriptions serve as guides for managing the land and facilities to achieve desired carrying capacities.

### **Natural Areas**

An informal, self-guiding learning experience is provided for visitors in these areas. People are encouraged to get out of their vehicles and walk to features. The pace is slower with low to moderate levels of noise. Visitors typically focus on specific resources with few visual intrusions. Visitors experience a sense of learning through onsite interpretation or other means.

The length of stay at each site is relatively short in comparison to the time the visitor spends in the Park. There is a moderate amount of social crowding and moderate social interaction at points of interest and along dead-end trails. Guided ranger walks are occasionally provided for visitors at some locations. Development is limited to items such as

low interpretive panels, small directional signs, and hardened dirt paths. Fences and boardwalks are used as a last resort to protect resources if other management efforts do not work. The tolerance for resource degradation is low to moderate, depending upon the sensitivity of the resource to impacts by use. The degree of onsite visitor and resource management is moderate and increases or decreases with visitation levels.

### **Sensitive Resources and Habitat Types**

The Park management will continue to protect, restore and enhance all habitat areas, especially those that are identified as sensitive or critical, per law and NPS policies. The level of detail regarding the biological function of habitat types and definition of desired future conditions will be developed within the framework of a parkwide resource management planning effort.

### **Wilderness**

Visitors in this landscape experience a primeval environment largely untrammelled by humans, where the land retains its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, but may contain features of scientific, educational, scenic or historic value. Elements of modern human occupation are not appropriate unless they meet the criteria of the Wilderness Act. Some sections of wilderness within the Park may have remnants of human occupation, but these features are considered a part of the history and scenery to be explored. A high degree of physical exertion may be required to hike or ride horseback to this area. A minimal amount of hiking trails may be present, often requiring a person to travel cross-country to get to a desired destination. Abandoned roads may be used as routes of travel. Opportunities for independence, closeness to nature, tranquility, and the application of outdoor skills are high. Opportunities for social interaction with other visitors are low, as is the probability of encountering NPS employees. Likewise, evidence of other visitor impacts is minimal.

The landscape offers a high degree of challenge and adventure for visitors. The visual quality of the landscape contributes significantly to the visitor experience and needs to be protected. The tolerance for resource degradation is low, with the exception of designated trail corridors, where a slightly higher level of degradation is allowed within a few feet of the trail and at points where camping occurs. A minimal amount of resource and visitor management is present. Offsite visitor management (provision of information) is low to moderate.

## Historic Preservation Areas

Historic preservation areas offer visitors a chance to gain a sense of the past without compromising the integrity of the resource. Often there are opportunities to learn by vicariously experiencing the emotions and thoughts of those who lived in the past. The experience is often a visual one, enhanced by smells, sounds, and a sense of physical space. Interpretive information adds color and meaning to the experience.

The degree of tolerance for resource degradation is low for historic resources. The chance of seeing other visitors and having social interaction is potentially high, depending on the degree of public access and visitor interest. The opportunity for contact with NPS personnel is high where ranger-led tours are offered. Visitor behavior is managed to protect the character of each place. NPS onsite management is high at sites with high visitation and impact sensitivity. Paved walks, fences, and interpretive panels are used as needed to accommodate public access and interest. If interest is high, improvements may be needed to allow visitors to experience these resources while protecting them from visitor use impacts. Improvements must not distract from the significance of each location. Some features are convenient and easily accessible with little need for visitors to exert themselves, apply outdoor skills, or make a long time commitment to see the area. Some features are located at remote locations and require more effort and skill to experience. Adventure is often a part of the visitor experience at these places. The way in which people currently gain access to these locations remains unchanged since this experience contributes to resource protection and its appreciation. Changes in access should only be made if there is strong justification to do so. Remote locations should provide a primitive setting with opportunities for solitude, exploration, and learning, with minimal amounts of human intervention such as signs or interpretive panels.

## Visitor Facilities

The visitor experience in these areas is heavily influenced by structures and other fabricated features, and they are part of the visitor experience. The pace is varied with opportunities to walk and drive. The site often is noisy with vehicles and people nearby. Visitors have opportunities to learn about Park resources and receive many services from facilities. Visual distractions from other visitors and their vehicles are common and expected. Buildings and other facilities are predominant, but where exceptional

natural elements or cultural elements are present, they should be made part of the visitor experience. These constructed features are coordinated by design to reduce visual contrast with the natural or cultural setting. Although these are developed areas, they should still offer a contrast from urban life and a chance to relax and enjoy the outdoors.

Most facilities are convenient and easily accessible by the public. Many areas provide a strong opportunity for social interaction. Encounters with NPS staff are frequent. The tolerance for social crowding is high but there are opportunities to learn and experience a change in pace from city life. Most facilities are accessible to visitors with disabilities. Resource impacts at visitor facilities are as low as possible and occur only when there is no practicable alternative. Visitors and facilities are intensively managed for resource protection, visitor management, and safety (that is, there may be fences, law enforcement may be more intensive, and visitor activities may be monitored or restricted).

## Paved and Graded Roads

Paved and graded roads are the dominant experience for most Park visitors. Visitors use these narrow corridors and roadside pullouts for touring, enjoying scenic overlooks, and gaining access to natural and cultural features. While traveling, visitors may read about and understand the features they are seeing. Bicycle travel is allowed, but motorized vehicles are more common. Viewing the scenery is very important, but the views are often of distant landscapes. Vistas are protected. First-time visitors may have a sense of exploration, but very little physical exertion is needed, outdoor skills are not necessary. Visitors may spend a long time in this zone. The probability of encountering other visitors is very high, although chances for social interaction are low except at roadside pullouts. The opportunity for direct contact with NPS staff is low unless emergency situations arise.

A moderate to high level of NPS management (highway signs, visitor protection) is needed to provide visitors with a safe and enjoyable experience. Because maintenance work and driving off roads cause dirt roads to grow wider, it is necessary to specify maximum road widths and approved pullouts. Roads are limited to specified widths unless where strong justification exists. Resources can be modified for essential visitors and administrative operational needs. The tolerance for resource degradation in these corridors is moderate. Allowable impacts are restricted to a short distance from roads and pullouts.

## Unmaintained Dirt and Four-Wheel Drive Roads

Unmaintained dirt roads provide a unique experience for drivers and other users such as mountain bike riders, equestrians, and hikers. The predominant use is by visitors in vehicles driving to enjoy the scenery, or to go to historic mining sites, or to a specific feature. Some visitors experience a strong sense of exploration, challenge, and adventure. Travel speeds are slow to moderate, with the potential of frequent stops. Many of these roads give visitors a sense of escape from urban life. The areas through which these roads pass are predominantly natural, but there is some evidence of people having used the area in the past and present. Increased impacts from human use are prevented to protect the existing qualities of the landscape. Support features such as small directional signs or interpretive panels are present but infrequently seen and inconspicuous in character.

Visitors may need to extend themselves, use outdoor skills, and make a long time commitment. Some roads within the Park have rough conditions that often require specific driving skills and more time to complete the route. Opportunities for challenge and adventure are available on some 2-wheel drive roads that require high clearance vehicles. Opportunities for social interaction are low, unless people are traveling in a group. A moderate level of management is provided on heavily used roads to protect resources and visitors. Many people who use these roads do not wish to see many other vehicles.

Resource modification is evident, but where possible, should harmonize with the natural environment. The Park's tolerance for resource degradation in this zone is low except that limited signs, road surfaces and shoulders, pullouts, and camping areas are permitted. It is recognized that some 4-wheel drive roads have a number of short sections that have been widened by natural occurrences such as washouts.

## INTERPRETATION

### **Background**

An "Interpretive Prospectus" (NPS 1990) was completed for Death Valley National Monument in 1990. The prospectus identified interpretive planning and development details appropriate for the monument. The expansion of Death Valley and the designation of large tracts of wilderness have made this plan obsolete.

### **Plan Actions**

The Park interpretive program will integrate in a balanced fashion the geological, cultural, and biological

aspects of the Park. Through its primary interpretive themes, programs and interpretive information will concentrate on the harsh environment and the adaptations that all living things must make to survive. The three key subjects to be interpreted will include:

- geological processes and geographical relationships
- the cultural, historical, prehistoric, and Native American record
- desert ecosystems

The Park staff will continue to seek ways to improve the educational outreach program in surrounding communities and develop partnerships with local schools and similar groups. The intent of this program is to increase local community awareness of the Park purpose and resources, and continue to develop favorable partnerships and mutual support.

A comprehensive interpretive plan will be developed to replace the 1990 interpretive prospectus. This plan will reflect the additional Park lands, present individual site plans, and identify other appropriate support documents. It will also address the interpretive needs of Scotty's Castle and its related resources and will identify additional opportunities for visitors to learn more about the castle and its builders. Until the new comprehensive interpretive plan is developed for the entire Park, the current prospectus will direct the methods for interpreting the Park's varied resources.

Cultural resource sites that are easily accessible and historically important will be treated as significant interpretive stops. Access to other cultural resources will be improved only if the historical significance or resource integrity of a site made it worthy of a major interpretive effort and if its integrity is not threatened by an increase in visitation. The Park will increase efforts to inform the public, particularly in backcountry locations, that all historical and archeological objects are protected under federal law.

The Park will continue to seek additional ways to improve the living history program or other methods of interpreting Scotty's Castle.

The interpretation of prehistoric and contemporary Native American cultures will be integrated into parkwide interpretive themes, focusing on human adaptation to the desert environment. Programs, demonstrations, and guided walks will provide opportunities for visitors to understand these cultures. Tribal consultation will take place when planning interpretive opportunities pertaining to indigenous peoples.

To ensure the protection of especially fragile natural and cultural values, resource management specialists, interpretive planners, and designers will work together to develop ways for visitors to see the resources without causing unacceptable damage. The Salt Creek boardwalk is an example of this cooperative effort.

Many sites may contain fragile resources and safety hazards that must be considered when planning for access and interpretation. Measures will also be taken to mitigate any potential effects of increased visitor use. Wayside exhibits or brochures will be used to interpret these areas.

## **INFORMATION/ORIENTATION**

### **Visitor Contact**

Information and interpretive programs will focus on helping people learn about and enjoy the natural and cultural resources of the Park and giving them the opportunity to experience the intangible qualities that make the area unique — the quiet and isolation, the depth of colors, and the clear sky. Interpretative materials will reflect the different ecosystems represented in the Park's boundaries and will be developed at a level appropriate to a recognized need and location.

Providing interpretation and orientation information to visitors before they enter the Park will be emphasized. Visitors could also contact the Park by telephone, mail, internet, satellite information centers, and other means. The Park will continue to support the multiagency information center at Lone Pine, California, which serves visitors accessing Death Valley from the Owens Valley to the west, and the Mojave National Preserve's facility in Baker, California, which assists visitors approaching the Park from the I-15 corridor to the south. These points will provide additional locations for visitors to obtain orientation and interpretation information for the Park and the region prior to their arrival. The objective of supporting these offsite facilities will be to better prepare visitors for their visit to the Park.

Interpretive services will be provided wherever NPS staff could effectively connect with the public to increase their understanding and appreciation of Park resources. Staffed information/fee collection stations will continue to be located in Beatty, Nevada, and at Stovepipe Wells. Additional interpretive staffing and services will be placed at Stovepipe Wells to provide better year-round information to visitors.

Ranger stations at Grapevine, Wildrose, and Shoshone will also provide visitors with information and operate with volunteer staff as available. If visitation increases at these facilities, funding will be sought to increase NPS staff presence at these facilities to meet visitor demand for assistance.

Unstaffed orientation and information stations ("reception centers") will be developed within the Park along the Park's five major entrance roads that receive relatively high levels of traffic. These information stations will be proximal to fee collection stations, where applicable, so that visitors could receive additional information after paying entrance fees. Unstaffed information stations will function to help orient and inform visitors soon after they have crossed the Park boundary, rather than waiting to get information at the more distant developed areas in the Park interior.

Operations at Furnace Creek and Scotty's Castle will continue to provide visitor services such as a staffed visitor information desk, interpretive displays and exhibits, a large auditorium, and sales outlet of the Death Valley Natural History Association. Information on hiking, backcountry historical sites, and other day use activities will be made available at the visitor centers and the reception centers. The number of staffed interpretive programs will be expanded.

The Park will continue to maintain and enhance information on Death Valley via the National Park Service website ([www.nps.gov/deva](http://www.nps.gov/deva)), and will continue to explore new opportunities for information distribution as technology develops. Death Valley is also a partner in a project to provide interagency desert-wide visitor information on the internet at a single site: ([www.californiadesert.gov](http://www.californiadesert.gov)).

Visitor support services, such as site bulletins and information/interpretation wayside exhibits will be developed to complement the expanded Park boundaries. Wherever wayside exhibits are inappropriate and interpretation of resources is desired, brochures, or similar media, will be developed for specific themes or specific areas. They will be provided or offered for sale in appropriate locations.

Over 95% of the Park is designated wilderness and large portions of the Park are only accessible by four-wheel-drive vehicle, bicycle, or on foot. Visitors will explore these areas on their own. In these areas, onsite information/interpretive services will be minimal to non-existent and be restricted to threshold access points with few exceptions.

## Waysides and Exhibits

Signs or exhibits will be posted at key road intersections leading to significant features. Distances, road conditions, and destinations or features along the way will be listed. This information will also help prevent people from mistakenly trying a road beyond their automobile's capability or their personal time limits. The Park will evaluate the need for trailhead information waysides that could serve visitors using trails. Design standards for these signs will be established in a Park sign plan.

Basic orientation information will also be made available on a 24-hour basis by using a variety of methods such as lighted exhibits, brochure dispensers, audio, permanent and portable information. Information and interpretive material would be available in other languages to meet the increasing demand. The use of international symbols and graphics will be used as much as possible to avoid multiple languages on displays.

The Park has many secondary entrances that receive moderate to light amounts of highway traffic. These points will be evaluated for the need to place information panels that will serve the same basic function as the information stations, but on a smaller scale. Each location will be evaluated to determine the appropriate information needed at each entrance.

Interpretive wayside exhibits within the Park will continue to be upgraded in accordance with a wayside exhibit plan. Additional wayside exhibits will be developed for key features along heavily traveled corridors in recently acquired lands and elsewhere in the Park if the need to interpret and or protect resources arises. Interpretive waysides will be kept to a minimal level (or number) on backcountry roads.

## Partnerships

The National Park Service will continue to cooperate with other agencies and organizations to make information available along approach routes to the Park. Locations for displays and/or free publications outside of the Park will be considered to provide ways to serve people who want advanced information on the Park. Partnerships with communities, businesses and tourism associations may need to be developed to achieve this objective.

The Park will enter into partnerships with other land management units to provide the public with a variety of information on outdoor recreational opportunities within the region.

Partnerships will also be sought to fund various projects or projects within all management divisions in the Park.

## VISITOR FACILITIES

### *Background*

The Park has visitor centers at Furnace Creek and Scotty's Castle. The largest complex, centrally located at Furnace Creek, includes a staffed visitor information desk, interpretive displays on the natural and cultural features of the Park, a large auditorium featuring both orientation film and slide programs, and a sales outlet of the Death Valley Natural History Association. This facility, completed in 1960, was planned when annual visitation was 250,000. Its interpretive mediums are dated and focus on the monument lands. The 49ers association has provided assistance to the development of the visitor center.

Scotty's Castle visitor center is located in one of the historic structures north of the castle. New displays, which will depict the history of the people, construction of the buildings, acquisition by the National Park Service, and the significance of the complex are now in place. The visitor center contains a sales outlet, and during the summer season, it serves as a general information and ticket sales counter. The guided tour of the castle involves employees dressed in period costumes that tell the story of how the castle came to be and of the individuals who lived there.

Staffed information / fee collection stations in Beatty and at Stovepipe Wells operate on a full schedule seven days a week year-round. Ranger stations at Grapevine, Wildrose, and Shoshone provide visitors with information and operate with available volunteers.

The Park supports a multiagency information center at Lone Pine serving visitors accessing Death Valley from the Owens Valley to the west. Mojave National Preserve's Baker facility assists visitors approaching the Park from the I-15 corridor to the south. These facilities provide information, orientation, and interpretation for the Park and the region.

### *Plan Actions*

All improvements to visitor facilities will be subject to federal requirements to meet accessibility standards for people with disabilities. The Park staff will also consider creative ways to increase the recreational opportunities for visitors with disabilities.

## Entrance/Information Facilities

Care will be taken to visually blend these entrance / information stations with their surroundings. Entrance stations are planned for State Highway 190 on the east and west sides of the Park. This will improve visitor information as well as increasing fee revenues. The existing Grapevine Ranger Station will continue as an information station that is staffed as staff and funding allows.

## Interpretive Facilities

The Park will continue to operate major visitor centers at Furnace Creek and Scotty's Castle. The largest visitor services complex is centrally located at Furnace Creek and includes a staffed visitor information desk, interpretive displays, a large auditorium, and the Death Valley Natural History Association sales outlet. This facility was completed in 1960 and designed when annual visitation was 250,000. In 1999, visitation was about 1.2 million. Its interpretive media is dated and focuses on the old monument lands. Actions will be taken to update this facility and improve interpretive displays and to expand the number of displays to include information on recently acquired lands. A comprehensive design plan will be prepared to update and improve the Furnace Creek visitor center.

Other structures at Scotty's Castle might be opened for public tours or adapted for other uses if these actions are compatible with recommendations from the historic resource study/historic structure report and the goals of restoring the resource's cultural landscape. Such uses might include exhibit space, audiovisual presentations, or curatorial space. The Park will prepare a study to consider ways to reduce long waits for tours and parking on busy holiday weekends at the Castle. Options might include a reservation system.

Comprehensive design packages for visitor facilities will strive to balance resource protection with visitor access and safety, minimize impacts on sensitive resources, and improve the visual quality of the areas and overall visitor experience. Measures will be taken to mitigate any potential effects of increased visitor use. Locations for such improvements include key attractions such as Badwater or especially sensitive natural and/or cultural resources such as Eureka Dunes and Devils Hole.

## Developed Campgrounds

### Background

Death Valley National Park has nine developed campgrounds that offer a variety of camping expe-

riences. Most campground use occurs primarily from November through April because of the cooler temperatures. Most visitor use is concentrated at Furnace Creek and Stovepipe Wells. The Sunset campground at Furnace Creek consists of an expansive open area, which is used by recreational vehicles and trailers. Many people stay overnight in recreational vehicles, but the number of such users appears to be declining. The Park recorded 231,902 overnight stays by recreational vehicles in 1979 compared to 165,253 in 1995, a 28% decrease in RV users. Campgrounds at Furnace Creek and the group site at Texas Springs are on a campsite reservation system. Furnace Creek, Stovepipe Wells, Sunset and Texas Springs campgrounds are wheelchair accessible. Mahogany Flat, Thorndike, and Wildrose, on the west side of the Panamint mountain range (4,100–8,200 feet elevation), are subject to seasonal closures due to snow and other weather.

Death Valley has over 600 developed campsites. The following is a list of the campgrounds and their campsite numbers:

- Emigrant — 10 sites
- Furnace Creek — 136 sites
- Mahogany Flat — 10 sites
- Mesquite Spring — 30 sites
- Stovepipe Wells — 200 sites
- Sunset — 1000 sites
- Texas Spring — 92 sites
- Thorndike — 10 sites
- Wildrose — 30 sites

In 1997 five campgrounds charged a fee, either \$16.00 or \$10.00. Emigrant, Mahogany Flat, Thorndike, and Wildrose campgrounds do not charge fees.

The entrance fee to the Park in 1997 was \$10.00. Fees are collected at the Grapevine entrance station, Beatty ranger station, Stovepipe Wells ranger station, Furnace Creek visitor center, and Baker visitor center. This is paid on a voluntary basis at all locations except the entrance station. Since there are no entrance stations on State Highways 190 or 178, it is not known how many people traveling these roads actually pay the entrance fee.

### Plan Actions

The Park's existing campgrounds will be improved by eliminating safety hazards, better defining and separating sites, improving restrooms, and adding amenities such as newer picnic tables. Camping facilities at higher elevations will be upgraded to

enhance summer camping activities. All recreational vehicles (RV) campgrounds will be designed to meet national fire codes, which require 900 square feet per RV site and allow a maximum of 30 recreational vehicles per acre. The Park staff will work to identify issues and concerns related with tent camping and find ways to accommodate all types of campers, including tents, in developed campgrounds, while striving to enhance the visitor experience.

The existing campground at Stovepipe campground will be redesigned.

The Sunset, Texas Spring, and Furnace Creek campgrounds will be extensively redesigned to accommodate average winter demand and improve camping conditions. The total number of campsites at Sunset will be reduced because the campground is rarely used to capacity. Demands for additional camping areas, such as during the '49er Encampment and spring holidays, will be handled at designated overflow areas, which will be closed at other times. The Furnace Creek area development concept plan will incorporate these changes.

## **RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

### ***Background***

Most visitation to Death Valley National Park has historically occurred during the cooler months of fall, winter and spring, but recent visitation figures indicate that visitation during the summer months has increased significantly to the point that Park staff no longer consider summer the slow part of the year. The months with the highest visitation figures in past years had been November, March, and April. High visitation in November is associated with the 49ers encampment. Recent visitation figures show a close balance between visitation in cool and hot months.

Death Valley has attracted people for many reasons, but the prime reasons seem to be the scenic beauty, the opportunity to visit the lowest and hottest place in the Western Hemisphere, and the notoriety of the name "Death Valley." People are also drawn to the area because of the contrasts that the desert provides to their place of residence. The majority of all visitors spend their time on the paved roads sightseeing and going to major attractions such as Dantes View, Scotty's Castle, and Badwater. Currently, very few of the total number of visitors venture onto unpaved roads to visit the remote sections of the Park. These sections include such places as Eureka Dunes, Saline Valley and Hunter Mountain, but that number is expected to increase

as a result of recent newspaper and magazine articles and the promotion efforts of local communities.

Visitor surveys were conducted in 1990, 1994, and 1996. The 1990 survey was conducted by contacting visitors in developed and remote areas of the Park. The 1994 survey focused on backcountry areas of the Park and the 1996 survey was conducted in developed areas and major visitor attractions. The 1994 survey included Saline Valley. The results of these surveys indicate that visitors participated in the following activities:

Other activities which reported less than 20% participation include: visiting Scotty's Castle, stargazing, driving backcountry roads, taking a tour of the castle, hiking more than two hours, golfing and a mixture of other miscellaneous activities.

- 72% of foreign visitors were from France, Germany and Switzerland.
- 21% of all visitors were from California.
- 72% of the visitors spent less than 1 day in the Park.

The 1994 backcountry (remote sections of the Park) survey asked people why they came. People gave the following reasons:

- 96% came to view desert scenery
- 82% came to enjoy the wilderness and open space
- 81% enjoyed recreation such as hiking, driving back roads and camping
- 78% came to experience solitude and quiet
- 57% were there to learn more about local history
- 56% came to view and study plants and animals
- 16% came for "other" reasons such as photography, riding bicycles, study geology and geography, enjoy the warm clean air, and visit family and friends

The backcountry of Death Valley has been primarily used by California residents who return to seek solitude and desert scenery. Most visitors took day hikes and visited cultural sites. The survey also sampled visitors in the recently acquired Eureka and Saline Valleys. The Saline Warm Springs area continues to attract many visitors. It is estimated that 14,000 people travel the Saline Valley road each year. Park rangers reported approximately 120 vehicles parked at the warm springs the day after the Thanksgiving holiday in 1996. Visitors on the ground on that weekend reported the number of vehicles at 76.





Visitation to the Eureka Dunes is unknown at this time, but recent observations indicate a steady flow of visitors during the cooler months. Visitation to the Greenwater Valley and Saratoga Springs is relatively light at this time but may increase in the future.

There is a growing number of people who are choosing to explore the land with a mountain bike. Bicyclists have traveled the Saline Valley road and the Steele Pass road, which connects Saline and Eureka Valleys. BLM rangers have reported an increase in mountain bike use in the Deep Springs Valley, which is north of Eureka Valley. A 1995 back-country visitor survey for Death Valley indicated that 10% of the users had ridden bikes on dirt roads.

Death Valley is an internationally recognized destination. Commercial tour groups visit Death Valley, often as part of a loop tour, which includes Las Vegas, Grand Canyon and Yosemite. Overnight stays associated with tour buses have increased significantly from 342 buses in 1983 to 2,185 buses in 1995. Many Europeans come by rental car and Asian visitors often come in tour buses. International tourism continues to be strong as currency exchange rates continue to be favorable. Many Europeans come during the hottest part of the summer to experience the extreme temperatures of summer and a landscape that is often a drastic contrast to their homeland.

#### **Plan Actions**

The Park will support recreational activities that are compatible with management objectives and current visitor needs. It is recognized that recreational

trends continue to change and that specific, detailed direction on certain activities needs to be placed under a guiding statement which provides overall direction. NPS Management Policy on Recreational Activities provides guidance for determining the appropriateness of recreational activities in national park units. NPS *Management Policies* (NPS 2001) also states that each unit of the National Park Service has the responsibility to determine which recreational activities are appropriate or inappropriate, based upon the unit's purposes and values (see the purpose and significance statements for Death Valley National Park).

Unless the activity is mandated by statute, the National Park Service will not allow a recreational activity within a Park if it would involve or result in the following:

- inconsistency with the Park's enabling legislation or proclamation, or derogation of the values or purposes for which the Park was established
- unacceptable impacts on visitor enjoyment due to interference or conflict with other visitor use activities
- consumptive use of Park resources (this does not apply to certain traditional activities specifically authorized by NPS general regulations or by law)
- unacceptable impacts on Park resources or natural processes
- unacceptable levels of danger to the welfare or safety of the public, including participants

## Day Use Areas

The following areas will remain designated as day use recreation only with no overnight camping:

- All paved road areas to 2 miles from the road
- Titus Canyon Road
- West Side Road
- Wildrose Road
- Skidoo Road
- Cottonwood Canyon Road (first 8 miles)
- Racetrack Road (from Teakettle Junction to Homestake Dry Camp)
- Lost Burro Mine
- Ubehebe Lead Mine
- The main valley floor from Ashford Mill north to 2 miles north of Stovepipe Wells.

Additional day use areas may be established in the new additions to the Park.

## Backcountry and Roadside Camping

### *Background*

The backcountry is defined as any area located away from Park development such as campgrounds, visitor or administrative facilities; typically a place where development is out of view. Designated wilderness is included within backcountry areas.

Eureka Dunes and Saline Valley Warm Springs have informal campgrounds, which receive moderate to heavy use. The dunes are easily accessible by car while the springs can be accessed by car if the weather provides for good road conditions. The National Park Service traffic count figures indicate a monthly average of 200 cars that go to the dunes. The dunes are habitat to two endangered plants. One of the major threats to these plants is illegal offroad vehicle use. There are an estimated four or five informal campsites north of the dunes along dirt roads. Visitors may also camp along a spur road northeast of the dunes. A day use parking area with a vault toilet and two or three picnic tables is located on the northwest corner of the dunes.

Another day use parking lot is located on the north central end of the dunes. This parking area is large enough to handle an estimated fifteen to twenty cars, depending on how people use the space. A two-foot-high pipe fence frames part of the parking lot to contain vehicles and discourage any driving on the dunes. The parking lot provides direct access to the dunes for hikers and those wanting to play on

the sand. To protect endangered plants, minimum impact activities are encouraged.

Saline Valley Warm Springs receives use throughout the year. Over several years, visitors to the springs have built concrete hot tubs, a water system for the tubs, dug pit toilets, maintained the short access road, planted palm trees and a lawn to make their time at the springs more comfortable. In 1997 the National Park Service initiated the 30-day limit on camping that exists in the old monument. Marking posts have been placed in the ground to define the wilderness boundary surrounding the area in an attempt to keep vehicles out of wilderness and designate the camping area.

Public use of the springs has a history that goes back many years, but use began to rise during the 1960s, with this use level being sustained through the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 1990s. The place developed a social culture of its own, highlighted by a spirit of independence and freedom from the norms of traditional society of the day. Before the National Park Service obtained this land, visitors to the springs had developed their own social order and developed and managed constructed pools, camping and other facilities relatively independent of government funding or oversight. Visitors to the springs continue to provide maintenance to the facilities they have constructed, with the Park Service evolving the use and management of the area as a national park.

Backcountry camping must be more than 200 yards from any water source but is allowed at previously disturbed campsites that are 2 miles beyond developed areas, maintained roads, or day use areas. Camping is not allowed near the Lost Burro Mine and the Ubehebe Lead Mine or off several "day use only" dirt roads such as Titus Canyon and Racetrack road.

### *Plan Actions*

Small, primitive campsites may be established in some remote areas of the Park to offer alternative camping experiences including Hidden Valley, Butte Valley, Echo Canyon, the Nevada Triangle, Racetrack Valley, and Johnson Canyon.

If camping in wilderness areas resulted in trampled vegetation or compacted soils over widespread areas, specific campsites will be designated. The current backcountry voluntary permit system will be replaced by a mandatory permit system when and where better resource protection was needed or where visitor use had exceeded the desired future

conditions for backcountry visitor experiences and resource conditions. The Park has the authority to limit any activity that is causing resource damage. Where sensitive areas are noted as receiving or have the potential to receive adverse impacts, designated camping sites may be designated away from the area for that area's protection.

A wilderness/backcountry management plan is currently being prepared by the Park staff. This new plan is necessary because of the broad changes in the amount of area in the Park that is now designated as wilderness. Until the wilderness/backcountry management plan is completed, camping will continue to be directed under existing management. Currently there are over 350 miles of backcountry roads that are open to camping (unless designated closed) with an unknown number of informal campsites. However, use levels at most of these areas is quite light. The Park will evaluate camping in Dedecker Canyon to determine potential and direct impacts upon the local bighorn sheep population and rare plants from visitor activities in the canyon. Park staff will determine whether the canyon or sections of the canyon should be closed to camping to reduce impacts. The Park will also reconsider the issue of allowing limited campfires in the backcountry and wilderness areas during the planning process for the backcountry and wilderness management plans.

An inventory and monitoring program will be established to gather data on backcountry visitor use and related impacts associated with car and other types of camping. Small primitive campsites may be established for car campers and other camps in remote areas of the Park that receive above average use and associated threats to Park resources. The management objective will be to mitigate negative impacts to Park resources, protect human health and safety and provide an alternative camping experience. Improvements will be the minimal tool needed to solve the problem, such as defined tent pads and or anchored picnic tables. This proposal may be considered within the backcountry management plan. If camping in wilderness or other backcountry areas results in destroyed vegetation or other negative impacts to resources or the visitor experience, management actions will be taken to mitigate or eliminate impacts. Management actions may include required camping at designated campsites and or closure of areas to camping.

Backcountry and roadside camping is currently permitted under the following conditions:

- Backcountry camping is allowed 2 miles beyond any developed area, maintained road, or "day use only" area. Other areas may be closed to camping. Visitors should check at the visitor or information centers for current information.
- Vehicle campers shall use pre-existing campsites.
- No camping is allowed in some historic mining districts or on the valley floor from Ashford Mill to 2 miles north of Stovepipe Wells.
- Organized groups with 16 or more people and/or stock animals and 7 or more vehicles need a special use permit.
- The length of stay is limited to 30 cumulative days per year.
- Campfires are currently prohibited outside of designated campgrounds. The proposed backcountry/wilderness management plan will consider where such fires may be permitted under controlled conditions.
- Visitors are not allowed to collect firewood.
- The Park initiated a voluntary backcountry use registration system in 1998 (see "Saline Valley").

**Backcountry Cabins.** The current, interim management of backcountry cabins allows visitors to use cabins on a first-come, first-served basis. Visitors are directed to use the cabins in a way that preserves and protects cabins for future use. The length of stay is limited to 30 days. The Park is currently preparing a survey and inventory of cabins in the Park. Results of this survey will be used to prepare further management direction for these cabins based upon their historic significance, condition, and use levels. When the survey is completed, the results will be interpreted and placed within the wilderness/ backcountry management plan.

NPS *Management Policies* provide the overall guidance regarding backcountry cabin management:

"...facilities located in wilderness will be limited to the types and minimum number essential to meet the minimum requirements for the administration of the wilderness area..."

"The construction or reconstruction of shelters for public use generally will not be allowed, since wilderness users should be self-supporting in terms of shelter. An existing shelter may be maintained only if the facility is necessary to achieve wilderness management objectives or cultural resource protection objectives."

**Visitor Use in Saline Valley.** A site specific management plan will be prepared in consultation with interested public through the NEPA process. The

goal of the plan is to create a strategy for management of the area consistent with NPS mandates and policies. The plan will address protection of natural and cultural resources, exotic species, public health and safety, and environmental restoration, environmental and social carrying capacity of the land, and designation of the site as a backcountry campground and the appropriate number and development of sites. The following will limit the scope of the activities permitted at the springs:

- Soaking tubs/spas will be limited to the current level of improvements.
- The Upper Springs will continue to be protected from human improvements and use and from burros.
- The Saline Valley Road will be maintained to its current surface condition by Inyo County.
- An analysis will be made of the Chicken Strip airstrip to determine whether to retain it under 36CFR or whether it should be closed due to safety and/or resource impact concerns.
- The proposed site plan will also consider options for the active restoration of the upper springs to a natural condition.

Depending upon future use levels and priorities, the National Park Service could consider maintaining some of the facilities at the springs.

The National Park Service will work with groups associated with the springs, to manage this place in a manner where all members of the public feel welcome. The National Park Service will not actively promote expanded public use of the springs.

## **VISITOR USE FEES**

### ***Background***

Recreational fees and their use are determined in accordance with the criteria and procedures of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 (sec. 4, 16 U.S.C.A. 4601-6a (Supp., 1974) and section 3, Act of July 11, 1972, 86 Stat. 461), the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (P.L. 104-134), and regulations in 36 CFR 71. In April 2000, the National Park Service, in a partnership with the National Park Foundation, announced a new National Parks Pass. A parks pass provides entrance to all national parks for one year at a cost of \$50. Parks selling the pass will be allowed to retain \$35 for use on projects at that park. These passes are sold at all national parks and over the internet via several retail partners.

### ***Plan Actions***

The Park will continue to explore options for fee collection revenues consistent with congressional direction, including collection by third parties. In Death Valley National Park, entrance fees will continue to be collected at the Furnace Creek visitor center, Beatty, the Grapevine Entrance Station, Stovepipe Wells, and Baker. It is estimated that currently a significant amount of fees go uncollected. The construction of two entrance stations on Highway 190 is being actively planned to facilitate the collection of these fees and to improve visitor information at major entrances.

Nonrecreational fees will be collected for activities such as incidental business use permits, filming, and special park uses. Death Valley National Park has traditionally been an area where many companies come to film commercials and movies. The area receives a significant number of requests from automobile manufacturers to test vehicle-cooling systems. Filming and incidental business permits will continue to be granted on a case-by-case basis. Commercial tour buses are charged an entrance fee based on the seating capacity of the bus.

## **COMMERCIAL SERVICES**

### ***Background***

There are no commercial operation facilities located on federal lands recently acquired. Commercial use permits have been requested for filming and guided horse pack trips tours. More permits for other non-facility-based commercial operations will most likely be requested in the future. Park employees review compliance requests with Park regulations and approve appropriate uses.

Amfac Resorts operates a major visitor resort with lodging, food services, recreation, and employee housing. All of the commercial services are located on private land and are not under control by the National Park Service. Park management continues to work on a cooperative relationship with Amfac's local manager. The Furnace Creek Inn and Ranch are their two major operations, both located on 342 acres of private property. Amfac also manages the concessions operation at Stovepipe Wells, which has lodging, a restaurant, gas station, and swimming pool. They also manage a snack bar and gift shop at Scotty's Castle. Both operations at Stovepipe Wells and Scotty's Castle rest on NPS land and are subject to NPS controls on pricing and operations. The private operations at Furnace Creek provide visitors with 294 rooms, 2 swimming pools, an 18-hole golf

course, tennis courts, restaurants, gift shops, a service station, and general store. During the fall, winter, and spring, visitor accommodations are often sold out. Amfac now has 300–325 employees living at Furnace Creek; 89–90 live at Stovepipe Wells and 6 live at Scotty's Castle.

Panamint Springs Resort is on Highway 190 within the Park. This commercial operation is on private land and serves as a western gateway to the Park. The Park Service has no control over this operation but works in a cooperation with the owners. The resort has camping, lodging, a restaurant, and gas pumps.

### **Plan Actions**

All commercial businesses that operate in the Park are required to obtain a commercial use permit. The National Park Service operates a concession contract providing lodging, a restaurant and bar, gift shops, general store, and gas service at Stovepipe Wells and food service, a gift shop, and gasoline at Scotty's Castle. It is NPS intent to continue these services. Private overnight lodging not overseen by the National Park Service exists at Furnace Creek and Panamint Springs. The National Park Service will continue to work with the private commercial operations at Furnace Creek and Panamint Springs to achieve mutual objectives and resolve potential problems. No duplicative concession services are planned; however, where additional visitor service needs arise, the Park will evaluate concessions as a means to provide such services.

Organized recreational activities, that originate from outside of the Park and for which a fee is charged (such as guided motor coach tours, guided horseback and hiking trips, photography workshops, nature seminars, etc.), are required to obtain an inci-

dental business permit to conduct these activities. The permit is issued by Park staff and defines the terms under which the commercial activities can be conducted within the Park. The fee for this permit includes the direct and indirect costs of administering the permit. (There is currently a new law that shall require parks to issue Commercial Use Authorizations to replace the incidental business permit, but at present has not been instituted.) The Park will evaluate those commercial uses to ensure that the activities are compatible with Park purposes and that they don't detract or destroy the resources for which the Park was established. In some cases the Park may limit the number of commercial activities or operators if the Park Superintendent determines that Park values or resources are diminished or the Park visitor experience is compromised or intruded upon.

As the local and regional populations near Death Valley National Park increase, and if national and international visitation continue to increase throughout the year, the Park can expect more recreational activities to occur of a commercial nature or origin from outside of the Park. These activities may began to occur throughout the entire Park area and not just in the major tourist corridor of Highway 190 and the Furnace Creek area as currently exists. This may be especially true of the types of activities that originate from the Las Vegas, Nevada area as those visitors are looking for other recreational opportunities that exist beyond the city. The Park will be required to evaluate the types and numbers of these activities and shall issue no more commercial use authorizations "than are consistent with the preservation and proper management of Park resources and values."

